

Mike Greenberg: Digital, cultural, creative interlock

Web Posted: 05/09/2004 12:00 AM CDT

San Antonio Express-News

Three unrelated stories that shouldn't be unrelated:

Media artist and Internet maven George Cisneros is pleased that the economic value of the city's digital media community is finally getting recognition.

The San Antonio Technology Accelerator Initiative has belatedly included digital media arts as one of the "clusters" of tech industries with a strong local presence. The other clusters are aerospace, bioscience, information technology and telecommunications.

SATAI helps connect venture capitalists with entrepreneurs in the cluster industries, provides them with technical assistance and aids networking.

With media now included, San Antonio's sizable but struggling pool of talent in film and video production, digital animation and graphic design has access to resources, information and visibility it didn't have before.

Cisneros hopes the new status might encourage City Hall to strengthen the office that promotes film production. Currently part of the Convention and Visitors Bureau and between directors, FilmSA is concerned more with enticing production crews from out of town than with beefing up the local creative economy.

The creative economy in the larger sense is the central interest of the cultural planning process that the city's Office of Cultural Affairs launched last fall.

The process is in fact called The Cultural Collaborative: A Community Plan for San Antonio's Creative Economy.

According to lead consultant David Plettner, who has helped many other cities develop their plans, San Antonio is the first to explicitly link the arts with economic development in its cultural planning process.

At the moment, Plettner's team and local consultant Pablo Miguel Martinez are conducting focus groups and interviews to find out what people think San Antonio's needs and opportunities are.

Happily, SATAI president H. Randall Goldsmith and the members of the new digital media arts cluster have been involved in that process.

More such information will be gathered from a series of open community meetings, scheduled around town between June and September, culminating in a citywide meeting and presentation of a draft plan in October.

Smart Growth-San Antonio, formed two years ago to oppose the PGA Village deal, is incorporating as a nonprofit and looking beyond environmental issues to the larger smart growth agenda.

It's still an anemic group, with about 10 "core volunteers" and 50 members, according to executive director Marianne Kestenbaum, who's just starting to learn what smart growth is. She hopes to build a coalition of groups and individuals interested in smart growth.

I don't know if her group is capable of doing that, but a coalition of neighborhood, preservation, design, environmental, recreational and transportation interests is clearly needed as a counterweight to the pro-sprawl real estate interests that run City Hall.

What's that have to do with the creative economy?

Of the Cultural Collaborative's eight focus areas, at least three are directly related to the urban built environment — neighborhood revitalization, cultural venues and "civic aesthetics/public art."

Several others are indirectly related to the built environment — community outreach, tourism and the arts in education.

The creative economy needs the compact, mixed-use neighborhoods of the smart growth ideal in order to thrive — and vice versa.

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